
TALKING OF CITIES

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SOME YEARS ago Robert Littell wrote a description of a summer night in New York which I have never been able to forget. It had everything: people sleeping in the parks with newspapers over their heads, people on fire-escapes fighting for breath in a thin mixture of dust, air, and carbon monoxide, people in hotels ordering icebergs, people climbing the elevated steps and arriving at the platform too tired to fight for places in crowded cars, people fainting in laundries; and Mr. Littell wound it up by giving a quirk of his own to an ancient platitude. "It's not the heat," he said, "it's the city."

I wonder. Kipling also wrote of a city of dreadful night. Somehow the city is a more satisfactory object of comment than the cosmos, but our remarks about it are apt to be rather sweeping. One day when I was walking down Rector Street with a friend who is something of a poet and very much of a personality, a gust of wind from the North River flung pavement dust in our faces. My friend burst out with a vehemence which also I have never forgotten: "I hate this city!" Nevertheless, it is hotter and dustier in Texas than in New York. Night can be no less terrible on the arctic wastes than in Calcutta. Doubtless it is mankind that is most terrifying, but the biggest clots of humanity most of us have ever seen were attending football games.

We talk about cities, I think, because a city is something you can see.

The U. S. A. is an abstraction which has—or lacks—a foreign policy. Texas shades off by imperceptible degrees into Louisiana and New Mexico. But Dallas and Houston are visible realities. What you see when you fly across the country is a vast quantity of nature and certain cities, each with a definite pattern of its own, almost a personality. People say they like New Orleans or dislike Nashville, and their opinions express definite acquaintance. Do you know Chicago? Don't you love Denver?

Like other topics of conversation—the weather, sex, the New Deal—cities are sometimes discussed with wit and wisdom, often with vacuity. The two extremes are well represented by two recent books. One¹ “is designed primarily,” as the publisher says, “to supply the textbook needs of university and college courses.” These are, apparently, for the elucidation of the obvious. *Metropolis* should be very useful to any teacher whose chief anxiety is for neat examination questions. The author says that Babylon, Thebes, Athens, and Rome were cities. (“Name four ancient cities.”) He goes into italics in defining a city as “a limited geographical area, inhabited by a large and closely settled population, having many common interests and institutions, under a local government authorized by the state.” This will come as a revelation to the eager undergraduate. What a treat it will be for him to memorize these trenchant phrases!

Perhaps I am wrong to be contemptuous of the labors of a sincere and earnest colleague, but I confess that this sort of thing makes me very tired. Admirable as they are, sincerity and earnestness are not enough. Even in teaching it is desirable to say something occasionally. There is a curious irony in the professor's comment on the newspaper.

A fat compendium of miscellaneous data and conclusions [he says] is now the most popular type of American city newspaper. The mere size of a Sunday edition is so great that if a reader skipped the advertising section and scanned the rest at the rate of two hundred words a minute, he would have to spend eight hours to cover the contents. Because this bulk of news and special articles has become so formidable, some papers publish digests for busy readers, and others try to tell the story in headlines and pictures. [Doubtless that is why

¹ *Metropolis: A Study of Urban Communities*, by Howard Woolston. New York: D. Appleton-Century Company. 1938. \$2.75.

the *New York Times* has no headlines and publishes no pictures.] The tabloids thus offer a rubberneck ride around the world for a few pennies. The effect of such flitting glimpses of reality upon the minds of casual readers seems to be excitement rather than understanding. Many city people buy newspapers and chewing gum to keep up a flow of verbal and buccal activity. Chattering thus becomes a habit; reflection, a bore.

Alas, too true; but I wonder why it is that so many university undergraduates chew gum.

To compare such a routine academic performance to the work of Lewis Mumford² is certainly unkind, perhaps even unfair. After all, he is happily free from the incubus of "supplying" anybody's textbook needs. He writes only to be read. The perusal of his books is in effect a series of intimate conversations with one of the liveliest, most sensitive, and broadly cultivated minds of our generation—somewhat one-sided to be sure, but by no means altogether so. The truth is, what bores undergraduates is filling notebooks with inanities. Reflection is a pleasure, as our inveterate chattering attests, and stimulated by Mr. Mumford's flow of verbal and buccal activity we find ourselves thinking furiously of kings as well as cabbages, confirming his brilliant generalizations with our own limited experience, countering his crotchets with notions of our own, always wanting to interrupt his monologue but hesitating to do so for fear of missing something else to come.

This is no chance conversation. Three circumstances combine to make Lewis Mumford's discourse on cities uniquely interesting. In the first place he is a life-long student and critic of architecture who views the city with the eye of an artist. He is also a perfectionist, a dreamer of utopias, and a practicing authority on city and regional planning. In addition he is a social theorist—I hesitate to say a sociologist for fear of putting him in too academic a company, but something on that order. Reading *The Culture of Cities* is listening to the author of *Sticks and Stones*, who is also the author of *The Story of Utopias*, who is also, most recently, the author of *Technics and Civilization*.

² *The Culture of Cities*, by Lewis Mumford. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company. 1938. \$5.00.

All these interests, I should judge, were stimulated by Mr. Mumford's early and long admiration for Patrick Geddes; but this is most notably the case with the technological framework of his analysis. Readers of his last book will remember that it discusses the development of industrial society in terms of a series of phases each of which was thought to be dominated by a phase of industrial technology. In the eotechnic phase the machine process as we now call it was just dawning on medieval culture, for example in the form of clockwork, the prototype as many students think of all subsequent machinery. This was followed by the paleotechnic period dominated by coal and iron, the blast furnace, and the early railway; and this in turn gave way about half a century ago to the neotechnic phase of electricity, turbine and internal combustion engines, the lighter metals and alloys. The biotechnic phase which consummates the series is by no means fully realized as yet; but it is already emergent and may be characterized perhaps by the humanization of the machine or the scientific rationalization of life processes.

It is in this perspective that Mr. Mumford sees the evolution of the city. His opening pages are a defense and renovation of what he might by analogy have called "eopolis," the much-maligned medieval town, which, he thinks, was no such slough as most of us suppose. It had a meaning and a purpose and it knew its business. Walls, castles, and cathedrals made a frame of reference within which streets and dwellings were intelligently planned. Canals and moats provided drainage, and the open country lay just beyond. The cult of the public bath kept the community clean and sweet, and though eopolis was certainly not aseptic (for we have not forgotten the Black Death) its stench was homely, so to speak, and natural.

What followed was a transition "from medieval universality to baroque uniformity: from medieval localism to baroque centralism: from absolutism of God and the Catholic Church to the absolutism of the temporal sovereign and the National State." In characterizing the outcome as baroque the author has intentionally used a term of architectural depreciation as one of social description.

The concept of the baroque [he says] as it shaped itself in the seventeenth century, is particularly useful because it holds in itself the two

contradictory elements of the age. First: the mathematical and mercantile and methodical side, expressed to perfection in its rigorous street plans, its formal city layouts, and in its geometrically ordered landscape designs. And at the same time, in the painting and sculpture of the period, it embraces the sensuous, rebellious, anti-classical, anti-mechanical side, expressed in its clothes and its sexual life and its religious fanaticism and its crazy statecraft.

This baroque culture evolved "a new conception of space." It mastered the principles of perspective and its gardens brought the country to the city. But it was "an age of abstractions," of capitalism turned militaristic. "Power politics and power economics reinforced each other. Cities grew: rents rose: taxes increased. None of these results was accidental."

Their inevitable consequence was "the insensate industrial town" and "the rise and fall of megalopolis." Mr. Mumford is never in better form than when he is cursing the mill city of the nineteenth century or the metropolis of the early twentieth, and it would be difficult to find a more luxuriant growth of horrors. The closets of industrialism are full of skeletons and Mr. Mumford rattles their bones at the microphone of his twenty-tube superheterodyne literary style with deafening effect. But his object is to clear the air for quiet and sustained discussion—it fills two hundred pages out of five hundred—of the situation in which our civilization finds itself. It is a desperate situation. "*Starvation in the midst of plenty* applies to its social life no less than to its inequitable system of distribution." Nevertheless, Mr. Mumford is serenely confident that "the human failure of metropolitan civilization has awakened compensatory reactions; profound changes have been going on in life and thought which will alter the idolum out of which this civilization has grown."

He thinks of these changes in human and artistic rather than political or economic terms. What we are gaining is a sense of the "primacy of life," something more than a mere transfer of power from one hand to another or even from one to many. We are learning things, and we are being steadied by our discoveries. "One of the great advantages of mechanical standardization is to increase the number of constants in the environment; and this is equally true of the advance of scientific knowledge. It is ex-

tremely unlikely that medical science will suddenly discover that dark and airless buildings are preferable to light and airy ones, and that a cultivated landscape is more inimical to life than a crowded, dusty street." We are learning to appreciate the cultural stability which provides the regional framework of civilization. Although he is no less an idealist in politics and economics than in architecture, never missing a chance to point out the brutalities of power politics and power economics or to castigate the imbecilities of every fascist atavism, speaking at every turn for coöperation, socialization, collectivization, Mr. Mumford is not a political or economic doctrinaire. In his view no merely economic or political formula is adequate to civilize us. If we are to save ourselves, we must proceed "from a money economy to a life economy."

The aim is not more goods for people to buy, but more opportunities for them to live: hence only such increases in goods as are instrumental to "the best life possible." Under such an economic order, communal choices become more important than individual choices, and more and more of the activities of the citizen's life are released from pecuniary restraint. . . Fortunately, our civilization as a whole is now at a point technically where it is feasible to give the population as a whole that basis in good breeding and good nurture which has hitherto been the exclusive possession of aristocracies.

This, Mr. Mumford thinks, is the meaning of the change that has been slowly taking place in our civilization for more than half a century already. Its significance has not been generally grasped since "its result must have been the transfer of interest from the subordinate mechanical arts to the direct arts of life." This sounds a bit vague, but Mr. Mumford has something quite definite in mind. "Whereas the pecuniary economy expanded the role of the machine, the biotechnic economy enlarges the role of professional services: a greater proportion of the income and free energy go into the support of the artist, the scientist, the architect and technician, the teacher and physician, the singer, the musician, the actor." And this brings with it another possibility, one that is closest to the author's heart: "the universal rebuilding of cities for the sake not merely of better conditions of living, but of a more purposive creation and utilization

of the social heritage: such as men have occasionally had a glimpse of in Jerusalem, Athens, Florence, or Concord." For under the new biotechnic economy the city is to become again, as its noblest exemplars have always been, the focus of a new civilization.

These are large ideas. But instead of being vaporous they impact upon our minds with the flash and boom and tang of an extraordinarily vivid personality. Anybody could point out that a word like "insensate" is not a scientific term. Precisely what, we might ask, is a "sensate" town? Obviously what Mr. Mumford likes in the medieval towns was largely unearned increment: the fact that they were small, not over-built, not spoiled by muddling reconstruction, and surrounded by real country and not mawkish suburbs; just as what he hates in the early industrial towns is the din and smut without which technological progress would have been impossible. It is not a defense of smoke to point out that nobody can build a fire without making some of it. Mr. Mumford knows well enough that, as somebody has said, if the Model T hadn't been as good as it was, it would be with us still. We owe the present automobile models to the merits, not the defects, of the earlier ones; and we owe Radburn, Greenbelt, and Frankfurt-Römerstadt to Birmingham and Leeds, Newark and Pittsburgh. Judged by their fruits what was best about those early nineteenth-century industrial cities was the smokestacks from which the magic of technology has conjured the steel and concrete and electricity and automotive transport of the garden city, and what was worst about them was precisely the neat pattern of the medieval town into which perforce modern industry was crammed.

This is not fault-finding. For our delight the author of *The Culture of Cities* is no impersonal savant, all understanding and no soul. He is an artist, a man of enormous enthusiasm and quick scorn. As a man he hates fascism, and he never misses a chance to lambast it. Likewise as a man he holds advanced views on sex, which undoubtedly he could manage to work into a treatise on the calculus. Mr. Mumford knows that sexual artistry is not the only interest that is served by separate rooms. I have my own door closed at this moment, and so, I rather think, had he when he was ruminating about privacy. But writing is a dull business. What makes Mr.

Mumford's biotechnics real to the reader is his own inordinate excitement about it.

The city, as I have said, is an ideal subject for such a lively conversation because it, too, is real, concrete, visible, and tangible. It is not a historical, economic, or political abstraction. It has personality, and the conjunction of these two personalities of author and subject make Lewis Mumford's best book, and the most vivid social portrait of our generation.